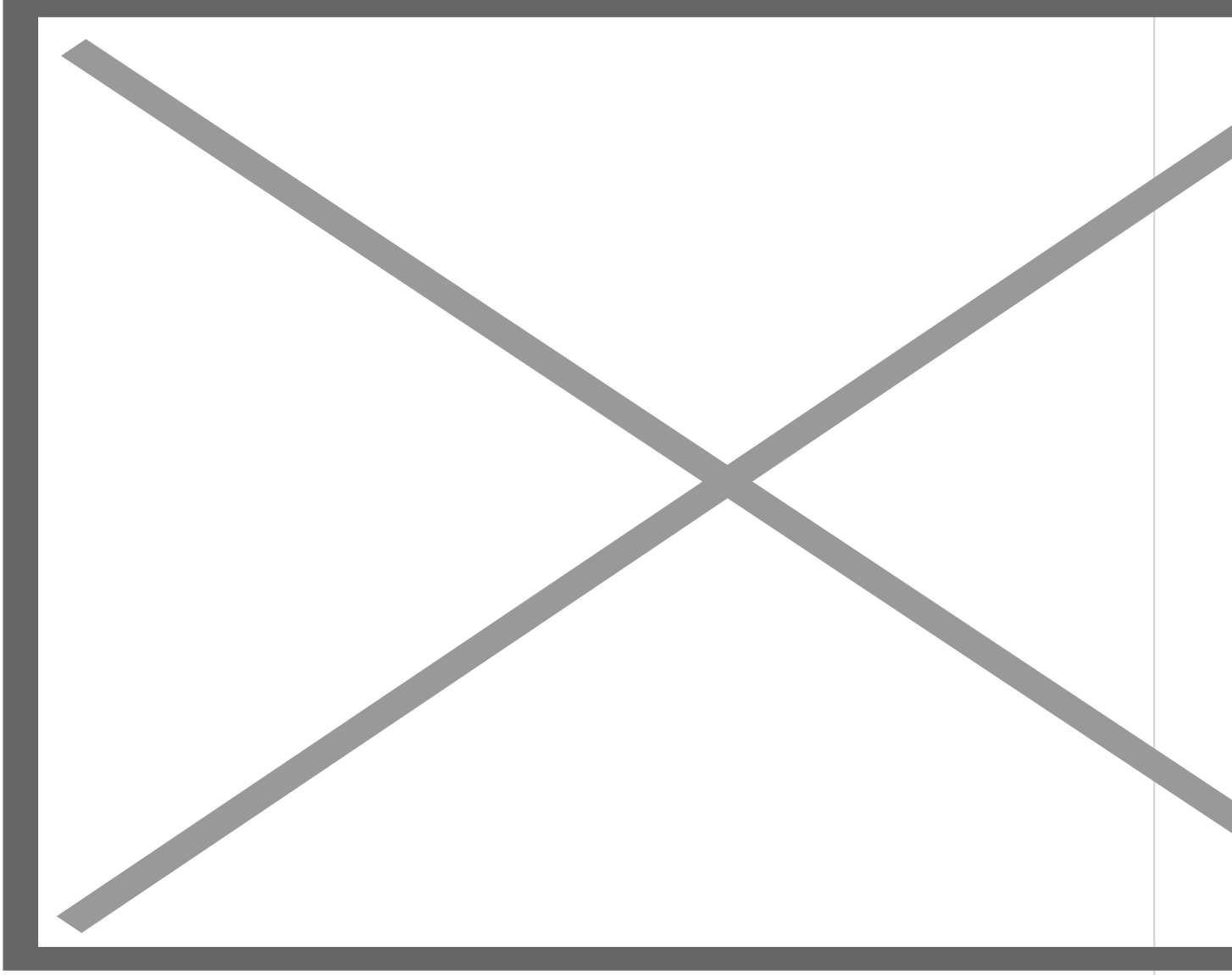


U.S. lawmakers call for release of environmental lawyer Steven Donziger

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Lawyer Steven Donziger, who won a multibillion-dollar judgement against Chevron on behalf of Ecuadorian villagers, was convicted of criminal contempt for not cooperating in a lawsuit filed by the oil giant [File: Brendan McDermid/Reuters]

Washington, December 1 (RHC)-- Nine United States lawmakers have called on the U.S. Justice Department to release environmental lawyer Steven Donziger, who spent decades battling Chevron Corp over pollution in the Ecuadorian rainforest and was sentenced to six months in prison in October on a criminal contempt conviction.

In a letter issued in Washington, DC, the nine Democratic members of the U.S House of Representatives -- which included Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib -- called on Attorney General Merrick Garland to take "immediate action."

They noted that Donziger was jailed on "petty contempt of court" charges stemming from his non-compliance in a lawsuit filed by Chevron, suggesting the DOJ is partially complicit in his targeting by the oil giant. "This case has shocked the worldwide community of environmental justice and human rights advocates and creates a distinct chilling effect on this type of advocacy going forward," the letter said.

"As the United States is a party to the District Court case against Mr Donziger, we request that you act immediately to reclaim control of this case, dismiss the charges, and free Mr Donziger from his imprisonment," the letter said.

U.S. District Judge Loretta Preska sentenced Donziger after finding him guilty in May of "willfully" defying court orders, including by failing to turn over his computer and other devices.

Donziger had represented villagers in Ecuador's Lago Agrio region who sought to hold Chevron liable for water and soil contamination by Texaco – which was acquired by the company in 2000 – between 1964 and 1992. Donziger won a \$9.5 billion judgement against Chevron in an Ecuadorian court in 2011.

In 2014, U.S. District Judge Lewis Kaplan ruled in favour of Chevron, rejecting the Ecuadorian judgement and saying it had been secured through fraudulent means. Donziger was subsequently debarred from practising law in New York. He had been put under house arrest in 2019 while awaiting trial on contempt of court charges.

A panel of human rights experts commissioned by the United Nations said on September 30 that Donziger's home detention violated international civil rights law and recommended that he should be released.

In their letter, the legislators said the Biden administration "must send a clear signal that it stands with communities harmed by pollution and environmental destruction and the lawyers courageous enough to represent them and not the corporations that benefit from polluting the water, air, and land of local people."

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